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ABSTRACT

One of the purposes for providing children with multiethnic books is to promote acceptance of diversity, yet the results of this exposure have rarely been empirically studied. The purpose of this study was to explore the story-related topics of discussion initiated by eleven 4- and 5-year-olds as they used multiethnic books during small group adult-initiated readings and one-on-one child-initiated emergent readings in one daycare classroom. In addition to books containing only Euro-American characters, two multiethnic categories of books were used: Culturally Conscious, depicting a specific ethnic group; and Diversity Explicit, depicting various ethnic groups and containing text that specifically addresses diversity issues. The readings were audiotaped and content analysis of the transcriptions revealed slight differences in the themes and topics of child-initiated discussion that accompanied the different categories of books. The children initiated very few ethnically specific comments, but the Diversity Explicit books seem most likely to foster discussion specific to diversity issues. (Lists the 8 books read and 6 additional Diversity Explicit books.) (Author/RS)

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Preschoolers' Language During Use of Multiethnic Books in Daycare

Objectives and Rationale

Books depicting various ethnic groups, multiethnic books, are provided for children for a number of philosophical reasons, such as to promote acceptance of diversity; however, there is an absence of empirical research that has examined their use. The goal of the study was to describe the language used by 4- and 5-year-old preschoolers as they used multiethnic children's books in a daycare classroom.

Throughout the United States, more and more children are being cared for in daycare settings prior to formal schooling. It has long been established that quality emergent literacy experiences during the first five to six years of life can have a substantial impact on the subsequent literacy development of children, so quality daycare environments need to include rich literacy experiences. Due to changing demographics in the U.S. which indicate a "browning of America," it is becoming increasingly important to be sure that daycare settings include book collections that depict children from a variety of ethnic groups. While enhancing the self-esteem of children of color was one of the first goals of multiethnic literature (Harris, 1991), it is widely believed that fostering an awareness of and respect for ethnic diversity will benefit children from all groups.

In an extensive review of the emergent literacy literature, Teale (1987) noted that studies exploring story reading have been the most prevalent. Pertinent to the study here, a number of researchers have found that repeated readings of the same story can nurture the depth of the pre-reading child's cognitive processing (Martinez & Roser, 1985; Yaden, 1988). Additionally, once a pre-reading child has heard a story two or three times, he/she can "read" the story by relying on a number of sources, such as pictures and memory of prior readings and discussion; these readings are referred to as emergent readings (Sulzby, 1985; Elster, 1995).

In emergent reading studies conducted prior to the current one, the emphasis has been on the emergent readings themselves, rather than the type of literature being retold by the pre-reader. Because research supports the widely held belief that children are aware of racial differences by the age of three (Katz, 1982), the current study begins to fill in this gap by targeting young children and describing their emergent readings of multiethnic books provided in their daycare environment.

Methods

The site for the study was one community daycare classroom, and the participants were the 11 children enrolled there and their teacher. All of the children, six girls and five boys, were Euro-American, and their ages ranged from 53 to 66 months. The teacher was biracial, being of Euro-American and African American descent.

The research design can be labeled a field experiment, as data was collected within the naturalistic setting of the classroom and involved the manipulation of an independent variable--the exposure to Multiethnic and Euro-American children's books--by the investigator. Every two weeks during the eight week study, one Multiethnic and one Euro-American book were introduced into the classroom at organized group times. Each two week period is referred to as a "rotation," so there were rotations of four pairs of books. The children were divided into two groups, and on Monday of the first week of each rotation, the teacher read the Multiethnic book to her group while the investigator read the Euro-American book to her group in another part of the classroom. On Tuesday, the adults traded books, read them again to their respective groups, and repeated this process through Thursday, at the end of which, all children would have heard each book twice; this was the number of readings deemed necessary for the children's familiarization with each book, enabling them to do emergent readings. During the second week of each rotation, the two books were available in the book area in the classroom. The

investigator stayed in this area and when children entered during free play, they were encouraged to do emergent readings of the books.

The Euro-American books depicted Caucasian characters. The Multiethnic books fell into two categories: Culturally Conscious and Diversity Explicit. Culturally Conscious books depicted only African American characters and were included in the first two rotations. Diversity Explicit books depicted characters from a variety of ethnic groups, specifically addressed issues of ethnic and cultural differences, and were included in the final two rotations.

The Euro-American and Multiethnic books selected for each rotation were matched for characteristics such as length, theme, main character, and type of predictability.

The teacher-initiated small group readings and the emergent readings of individual children were audiotaped. Transcriptions of the readings were explored for recurring themes and topics in child-initiated comments. Additional data was collected through parent questionnaires regarding the child's home literacy environment and an audiotaped teacher interview conducted at the end of the study.

Results and Conclusions

Content analysis of the transcripts of small group readings and emergent readings revealed very few child-initiated ethnically specific comments (comments pertaining to physical characteristics that tend to differ between ethnic groups, such as skin and hair color). Further content analysis of the transcripts from the small group readings and emergent readings revealed story-related themes and topics in the children's discussion within each category of books. Themes and topics within small group readings seem to suggest that children use language which indicates current understandings as well as the construction of new understandings of material related to the books. Themes and topics within emergent readings revealed children's importations (information not included in the original text) from sources such as background

knowledge and prior small group readings. Across both types of readings, slight differences in the topics discussed by children emerged between book categories; Diversity Explicit books seem most likely to foster discussion about ethnicity-specific issues. If preschool teachers in daycare classrooms similar to the one used in this study want to provide multiethnic books for their children in an effort to initiate discussion regarding ethnic differences, it appears that the teachers need to be prepared to initiate that discussion themselves as the children are unlikely to do so without prompting.

References

Elster, C. (1995). Importations in preschoolers' emergent readings. Journal of Reading Behavior, 27, 65-84.

Harris, V. J. (1991). Multicultural curriculum: African American children's literature. Young Children, 46, 37-44.

Katz, P. A. (1982). Development of children's racial awareness and intergroup attitudes. In L. G. Katz (Ed.), Current topics in early childhood education (pp. 17-54). New York: Teachers College Press.

Martinez, M., & Roser, N. (1985). Read it again: The value of repeated readings during storytime. The Reading Teacher, 38, 782-786.

Sulzby, E. (1985). Children's emergent reading of favorite storybooks: A developmental study. Reading Research Quarterly, 20, 458-481.

Teale, W. H. (1987). Emergent literacy: Reading and writing development in early childhood. In Research in literacy: Merging perspectives (pp. 45-74), 36th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference.

Yaden, D. (1988). Understanding stories through repeated read-alouds: How many does it take? The Reading Teacher, 41, 556-560.

BOOK LIST

Rotation #1 - Weeks 1 and 2

Multiethnic / Culturally Conscious:

Pringle, L. (1993). Octopus hug. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press, Inc.

Euro-American:

Ackerman, K. (1988). Song and dance man. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Rotation #2 - Weeks 3 and 4

Multiethnic / Culturally Conscious:

Cummings, P. (1994). Clean your room, Harvey Moon! New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co.

Euro-American:

Teague , M. (1994). Pigsty. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

Rotation #3 - Weeks 5 and 6

Multiethnic / Diversity Explicit:

Nikola-Lisa, W. (1994). Bein' with you this way. New York, NY: Lee and Low Books.

Euro-American:

Williams, S. (1990). Mommy doesn't know my name. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Rotation #4 - Weeks 7 and 8

Multiethnic / Diversity Explicit:

Davol, M. W. (1993). Black, white, just right! Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

Euro-American:

Henkes, K. (1995). The biggest boy. New York, NY: William Morrow & Company, Inc.

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Some additional Diversity Explicit books...

This is Our House Michael Rosen
Two Eyes, a Nose, and a Mouth Roberta Grobel Interater
All the Colors We Are: The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color Katie Kissinger
(bilingual - Spanish / English)
All the Colors of the Earth Sheila Hamanaka
Whoever You Are Mem Fox
What is Beautiful? Maryjean Watson Avery and David M. Avery